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This newsheet is published in six languages (English, French, German, Dutch, Italian and Spanish) by the Directorate-General for Information, Communication and Culture of the

Commission of the European Communities,
Rue de la Loi 200 - 1049 Brussels - Belgium.
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Its contents do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Community institutions.



HIGH TECHNOLOGY: ECU 1,180m. to help less favoured regions

Because high technology is expensive, there is an obvious danger that investments will be concentrated in the economically well-off areas of the 12-nation European Community. It was to make sure that the Community's less favoured regions are not left far behind in the race to modernize economic infrastructures, that the European Commission sent to the member states early this year two programmes, code-named STAR and VALOREN.

Both have now been approved by the EC Council of Ministers. As a result, an estimated ECU 1,180m.* is to be made available from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), over the five years to 1990, to finance the development of basic equipment in two key areas: advanced telecommunications and energy.

Of the two programmes STAR is the more important; its estimated cost over the 5-year period has been put at ECU 780m., as compared to ECU 400m. for VALOREN. STAR is aimed at improving access to advanced telecommunications services in the Community's less-favoured regions, VALOREN at exploiting their energy potential, including alternative and renewable sources of energy, and encouraging a more rational use of energy by smaller firms.

The money will be spent in the less-favoured regions of seven member states, traditionally regarded as the main recipients of ERDF aid. While the largest single beneficiary is Italy (ECU 375m.), the Community's two newest member states will receive some ECU 500m. in all. Of this, ECU 315m. has been earmarked for Spain and ECU 185m. for Portugal. Greece's share will be an estimated ECU 150m.

Britain and France will receive much smaller amounts - ECU 40m. each. The sums earmarked for the U.K. will be used to finance projects in Northern Ireland. Ireland will receive some ECU 75m.

The two programmes now adopted by the EC Council of Ministers form the basic framework, within which each of the seven member states concerned will draw up, over the next six months, operational programmes for the European Commission's approval. The EC's contribution will be the largest possible under the new ERDF regulation, amounting to 55% of total expenditure, rising to 70% in the case of Portuguese projects.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.71 or IRL 0.76.

SOCIAL FUND: Impressive but insufficient

Last year, some 2.7 million persons threatened by unemployment or already out of a job were given a helping hand by the European Community's Social Fund. Even so, only a little more than half the demands for aid could be met, and the total actually paid out (ECU 1,400m.*) was below that for 1984, according to the Fund's report for 1985, just published by the European Commission.

The volume of aid extended by the Social Fund last year amounted to ECU 2,200m., although the Fund had some ECU 2,500m. at its disposal. The demands it received totalled nearly ECU 5,000m., however, an increase of nearly 50% over 1984. As a result, the gap between demands for aid and the aid actually given widened further, despite an increase in the Fund's resources - from 6.9% of the Community's budget in 1984 to 8.4% last year.

The Fund, which paid out ECU 1,400m. in all, had available for payments in 1985 ECU 1,500m., as compared to roughly ECU 1,800m. the previous year. To this shortage of fresh funds was added the problem of credits which remained unutilized because of procedural delays, despite a marked improvement in this respect since 1984.

As required by the Fund's regulations, the under-25s received 75% of the credits and the regions of highest priority+ 40%.

Projects aided by the Social Fund in 1985 ranged from an introduction to the new technologies to the training of handicapped persons and aid to migrant workers. The projects which attracted the greatest interest were those dealing with the training of the young and those aimed at helping job seekers.

Thus over 915,000 under-25s were able to get basic training immediately on leaving school. Another 420,000 were given the special training they needed to improve their job qualifications. Nearly 480,000 people of all ages were helped to find jobs, thanks to job creation programmes aimed at meeting community needs.

The main beneficiaries were Italy, with nearly 27% of the total, the United Kingdom (24%) and France (17%). Nearly 40% of the beneficiaries were women.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.71 or IRL 0.76.

+ France's overseas departments, Greece, Ireland, the Italian Mezzogiorno and Northern Ireland.

TOYS: European Commission makes fresh proposals on toy safety

Toys are big business; more than 60,000 different ones are on the market at any one time. But the number of accidents to children at play has been put at around 200,000. Although not all accidents are due to the toys themselves, the increasingly short lead time between the design of a toy and its sale makes safety problems more acute.

The European Commission has now sent the 12 European Community countries a proposal for a Council Directive aimed at guaranteeing the high level of safety essential to protect children. The Commission's draft, which defines a toy as "any product or material designed and intended for use in play by children of less than 14 years of age", requires member states to ensure that all toys put on the market meet certain essential safety requirements.

The Directive, which now awaits approval by the EC Council of Ministers, seeks to protect not only children but also domestic animals against risks to health and physical injury due to the toy's construction and composition. It calls for especially stringent safety instructions for toys meant for the very young.

The Commission's latest proposal, which replaces those it sent to the member states in 1983, owes a good deal to the "new approach" to technical harmonization and standards adopted by the Council last year. Despite the voluntary nature of these standards, the new rules of the European Committee for Standardization allow standards to be adopted by a qualified majority, but require all states to translate them into national standards. As a result, uniformity in the interpretation and application of these standards is now possible.

The Commission's new proposal lays down safety requirements by legislation. But it refers to voluntary standards for technical specifications on mechanical and physical properties of toys, flammability and electrical and chemical properties.

While the certification procedures which the Directive lays down are fairly complex, the European Commission believes they should ensure a high level of safety for toys made in the Community and imported from other countries. Toys which conform to European standards shall carry a model identification number and the Community mark, the symbol "EC".

UNEMPLOYMENT: Up 1% in September

End September, the number of unemployed in the 12-nation European Community had risen by 179,000. This represented a 1% increase in the number of jobseekers registered with unemployment exchanges. The majority of the "new unemployed" in September were school leavers and those who had just completed a training course, as the Community's Statistical Office, Eurostat, has pointed out.

During September the number of unemployed under 25 years of age rose by 3.2%. But the effect that school leavers have on the unemployment figures in the individual member states depends on the date on which the school year normally ends. Thus in Ireland, Germany and the Netherlands, many school-leavers registered with unemployment exchanges in August. In France and Luxembourg they did so in September.

The total number of registered unemployed in the 12-nation Community stood at roughly 15.8 million - 0.7% more than in September 1985. These figures conceal, as always, sharp variations between one member state and another. If unemployment rose by more than 4% in a year in Italy, Spain and Portugal, it actually fell by more than 12% in Denmark and Luxembourg.

Unemployment among the under-25s fell by 1.5% in a year, both in the Community as a whole and in individual member states, with the exception of Ireland, Spain and Italy*.

* No figures available for Portugal.

PRICES: The year's first big rise

Prices rose by 0.5% in September ending a period of relative stability going back to the beginning of the year. The rise was sharpest in Greece, Spain and Denmark, where the consumer price index rose by 3.8%, 1.1% and 0.8% respectively.

Elsewhere the increases were more moderate. Even so, nearly every member state recorded a bigger rise than in previous months: 0.5% in the U.K.; 0.4% in France, Portugal and the Netherlands; 0.3% in Italy, Belgium and Luxembourg and 0.2% in Germany.

For the 12-nation Community the price rise over 12 months was 3.4%, as compared to 1.6% in the U.S. and 0.4% in Japan. Within the EC inflation rates ranged between -0.4% in Germany and the Netherlands and +23% in Greece. The U.K. had an inflation rate of +3% and Ireland one of +3.1% (August).

AID: Food aid remains important in emergencies

Critics of the European Community's food aid programme seem to be growing more numerous. But even the critics agree that food aid has an important role to play in emergencies. And emergencies, unhappily, are always arising.

In the closing days of last month the European Commission granted emergency aid to four countries. It undertook to send 1,500t. of cereals to Vietnam, for distribution to the victims of typhoon WAYNE. The food aid, to be distributed by the Irish agency TROCAIRE, is a follow-up to the money sent in early October to buy basic necessities for the typhoon's victims.

The Commission also authorized the delivery of 1,370t. of cereals to camps for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. The shipment is being made in response to an urgent appeal by UNWRA.

But the arrival of food aid at its destination cannot be taken for granted. For the second time the Commission has stepped in to help finance an air lift in Ethiopia. It has allocated ECU 500,000* to ensure that food aid reaches the Tigre region.

When disaster strikes, people often lose everything. When Salvador was hit by an earthquake a month ago the Commission at once provided ECU 250,000 for the purchase of essentials. It has now allocated a further ECU 500,000 to help provide temporary housing.

1 ECU = UK£ 0.71 or IRL 0.76.

FOOD AID: Biscuits rather than flour?

Proposals for reducing the European Commission's food stocks abound. Among the more sensible is one put forward by the British Euro-MP James Ford. He would like the European Commission to consider turning part of the stocks into what he has termed "an emergency food biscuit".

Biscuits, as the Commission has pointed out, are available since last year under the Community's food aid operations and have already been supplied to international and non-governmental relief agencies. But they have proved (1) relatively expensive in relation to their nutritional content and (2) suitable only in very specific emergency situations.

SHIPPING: A European flag for the Community's merchant fleet?

The European Community flag - 12 gold stars on a blue ground - which already flutters above a number of official buildings, may yet become a familiar sight on the high seas. The fact is the European Transport Commissioner, Stanley Clinton Davis, recently proposed that ships registered in a Community country fly the Community flag.

The proposal involves more than a flag, of course. A European flag implies the adoption of some sort of European regulation for merchant shipping. According to Mr Davis the best of the various national systems would be incorporated into this new European regulation. It would have the power to attract European shipowners, often tempted by flags of convenience, but without skimping on social, safety or environmental standards.

Perhaps not surprisingly the European Transport Commissioner launched the idea in an address to the Worshipful Company of Shipwrights in London's Mansion House. The fact is that while European shipyards are undergoing a crisis without precedence, merchant shipping in the 12-nation Community is also having to face competition from countries with low wages and an undemanding social legislation.

For Mr Davis, European maritime transport must more than hold its own; it must expand, in order both to preserve jobs and to prevent the Community from becoming dependent on the merchant fleets of other nations. Maritime transport remains vital to a Community, much of whose wealth comes from transforming imported raw materials into products in demand in the rest of the world.

For the European Transport Commissioner, the Community's eleven national merchant fleets* cannot survive satisfactorily except by transforming themselves into a European fleet. Even if, in this field as in others, national interests, symbolized by the flag, remain strong, "exceptional problems need exceptional solutions".

Mr Davis also reminded his audience that the Community's ministers already had before them the European Commission's proposals aimed at guaranteeing free and fair competition in the shipping sector.

* Landlocked Luxembourg has no merchant fleet.

HUNTING LICENCES: Twelve very different systems

After the European passport and the European driving licence a European hunting licence? Quite frankly, No - at least not in the near future. The European Commission does not consider the matter as one which merits urgent attention, and it has no plans to submit proposals for a European hunting licence to the European Community Council of Ministers.

Hunting licences, as the Commission has indicated in its reply to the Dutch Euro-MP, Florus Wijsenbeek, will therefore remain a national, even regional or local matter. The fact is that not only does each Community country have its own system but in several of them, and more especially in France and Germany, it can vary from one department, or region, to another.

In most member states applicants for a licence must first pass an examination - something which is unknown in the U.K. and Ireland, although Portugal plans to introduce an examination from next year. In Greece and Spain examinations seem to exist only in legal texts.

In all countries which set an examination, part of it is theoretical. Only four countries have practical tests as well: Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Belgium plans to introduce such tests from 1987 and France from 1988.

In some countries there is more than one kind of hunting licence. Thus in Germany there is a special licence for the 16- to 18-year olds and another for hawking and falconry. Foreigners can apply for a special licence, valid two weeks.

Belgium makes a distinction between big and small game. The U.K. issues a licence to kill game; none is required, therefore, to shoot duck, wood pigeons and deer, which do not rank as game.

The time periods for which a licence is valid varies from country to country - and even between regions. In Germany the "normal" licence is valid a year - but in certain Länder it is valid three years. The cost also varies - from one region to another in Germany.